



a country song written by Stan Kesler and Charlie Feathers, 1955

I Forgot To Remember To Forget

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## I Forgot to Remember to Forget

Memory is a nonlinear narrative: pieces of a story that are parceled away in various places in your mind, that come together to tell another larger story. These parcels are made up of moments and events that when combined create a new story and offer new direction. Our original memory can become distorted by perspective. What influences your recollections? Maybe a photograph has influenced how you remember something; maybe you have intentionally or unintentionally altered a story so many times that you now believe the altered version to be a factual account. When we remember a moment or event we remember it in an instant; we do not relive this experience as it happened in real time, it is relived in a fleeting moment. It is the stories told and the memories captured in these fleeting moments that I explore in my work.

Consider an estate sale, a lifetime of memory parceled out in boxes. The original owner of the objects in the estate sale would have placed value and meaning on specific objects, based on personal memory and interaction with those objects. Family and friends of the original owner may view these same objects in completely different ways, placing value and meaning based on their own experience with the objects or with the owner. These objects may evoke a memory or create a new memory for the new owner. The remaining objects might then be organized by an auction house with a different set of criteria, such as monetary value. These items have now been rearranged to fulfill a new role. Finally, the potential buyer of these items edits the information from his or her personal perspective, creating their own memory and experience with an object or set of objects. Each of these people brings their own set of values, interests, experiences, and sense of history to bear on these objects, while the object remains the same. I think of this as the difference between perspective, “the capac-



ity to view things in their true relations or relative importance,” and perception, “the physical sensation interpreted in the light of experience” (Merriam-Webster).

My work functions much the same way: while an individual piece may stand on its own and evoke a certain reaction from the viewer, the same piece might take on a different meaning when seen with a group of works or in another environment. This concept func-

tions in several different ways in

my work. One way I address this concept is through the use of nearly identical replications or multiples.

Another method I use to investigate this concept is contextual, focusing on how or where a specific piece is placed autonomously or with other works. For example, consider my use of one of my characters, The

Ice Cream Sundae (Fig. 1). My first use of The Ice Cream Sundae was

as a multiple (Fig.2). I first displayed these on the floor, then later as part of a grouping with other “characters.” I have also displayed a small group of the Ice Cream Sundaes, as well as individual Ice Cream Sundaes. As a single character, the piece can be seen as comforting, maybe even enjoyable. Placing The Ice Cream Sundae on a pedestal allows it to become something to be obtained or fixated upon (Fig. 3). Displayed as a small group it may appear as friends enjoying each other’s company, something comforting. Different colorations of



Figure 1, Ice Cream Sundae from the installation titled *Orange You Glad I Didn't Say Banana*, 2014



Figure 2, *Collection of Ice Cream Sundaes* being readied for deinstallation, 2012

The Ice Cream Sundaes might suggest variety, but when more than ninety Ice Cream Sundaes are seen together they become an obsession, maybe a foreboding army or in another setting they may become inconsequential.

In this instance these Ice Cream

Sundaes were created to mimic the blind box promotional selling package, similar to what Kid Robot does with its Munnies and Dunnies. Kid Robot uses the blind box to promote multiple purchases in which the contents of the box are unknown and you are presented with the odds of getting each specific design within the chosen set. For me this not only allows for the element of surprise, but also challenges the buyer and observer to collect them all, which can be simply fun or become obsessive. This is very different from the single Ice Cream Sundae, which can be comforting. This use of the multiple also speaks to context. I have displayed just ten of these same Ice Cream Sundaes on a pedestal (Fig. 4). As a group



Figure 3, *Ice Cream Sundae on a Pedestal*, installation 2013

of three they seem friendly and inviting; they might make you feel happy or long for the experience that their image inspires. However, in the installation titled *Who Do You Think You Are* I use the full compliment of Ice Cream Sundaes. The Astronaut in this installation is



Figure 5, detail from the installation, *Who Do You Think You Are*, 2014

crouched down holding himself tightly as if hiding in a too small box, with several thought bubbles swimming around his head (Fig. 5). In this instance The Ice Cream Sundaes seem to be too much surrounding The Astronaut, altering his context, while not attaching they do seem to be overwhelming.

Similar to how the items in the estate sale serve to tell numerable stories about their owner, I see my work functioning as a way to tell multiple stories using the same works or images presented in different locations or under different circumstances. Stories are how people communicate their memories and perceptions. What makes a good story? A good story can illustrate an ideal, make a point, or relay important information about the past. Placing events in the context of a story makes these events significant. The mechanism of storytelling allows for the event to become relevant to the viewer, reader or listener, helping to create a memory. The story is completely different from how facts are laid out in a textbook. Text-

books tend to be linear and factually based, while in a story there are twists and bends, and in some cases time ceases to exist. A story can be a fictional account that illustrates a set of emotions or sparks dialogue. It can be a fictional account designed to evoke a real sense of emotion around a given circumstance. We all have a story to tell. How will you tell your story? For me humor is one of the most essential parts to storytelling. I see my subject matter as universal, but the manner in which I tell my story is uniquely American. Mark Twain has this to say about the humorous story:

The Humorous story is American, the comic story is English and the Witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of telling; the comic story and witty story upon the matter. The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular; but the comic and witty stories must be brief and end with a point. The humorous story bubbles gently along the others burst. The humorous story is strictly a work of art high and delicate art and only an artist can tell; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and witty story; anybody can do it. The art of telling a humorous story understand, I mean by word of mouth, not print was created in America and has remained at home (77-78).

There are many ways to tell a story. I choose to tell stories through images. Some Native American Tribes use dance as a way to communicate their history through story telling. Hoop dancing is one of the story telling methods used by the Lakota Tribe. The dancer who performs the hoop dance pays respect to the sacred circle (encompassed by the sky and the earth) and all that is connected to it - nature, animals, and people. According to Johnston, Hixon and Anton, the Lakota call this concept Ouate Can Gleska. Through dancing, they seek harmony and balance in all things with unity and equity. Within a circle all are equal: no one is in front and no one is behind, no one is above and no one is below. Pictographs are another method used by the Indigenous Tribes of North America. I discovered one such Indigenous story that included pictographs in a book on Inuit art Inunnit The Art of the Canadian Eskimo



by W.T. Larmour. According to the text, Inuit legend tells that giants, known as Tuiniit, inhabited Inuit land before them, but that these giants were easily scared off by the Inuit. The book also contained a photocopy of a rubbing illustrating this story (Fig. 5). It depicted the diminutive Inuit driving a giant from their village. I find storytell-



Figure 5, The Giant, 1965, Stone Carving, (Larmour 96).

ing through pictures or pictographs to be fascinating. This storytelling method has existed throughout history from earliest cave drawings to the Mayan stone carvings to Native North American Tribes to the Egyptians. In the drawing of the giant being attacked by the Inuit the giant reminded me of an astronaut. This in turn reminded me of a book I read in High School entitled *Chariots of the Gods*, by Erich von Däniken. In this book von Däniken proposed a theory that, in the past, aliens had landed on earth, and were, subsequently, deified as gods and worshipped by man. In this version of history we were told that the Incas built temples to the aliens and the aliens also helped the Egyptians build the pyramids. One possible explanation had the pyramids as possible landing strips for future aliens. Däniken states an interesting theory:

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.' (Genesis 6:4) Once again we have the sons of God, who interbreed with human beings. Here, too, we have the first mention of giants. 'Giants' keep on cropping up in all parts of the globe: in the mythology of east and west, in the sagas of Tiahuanaco and the epics of the Eskimos. 'Giants' haunt the pages of almost all ancient books. So they must have existed. What sort of creatures were they, these 'giants'? Were they our forefathers, who built gigantic buildings and effortlessly manhandled the monoliths, or were they technically skilled space travellers from another star? One thing is certain. The Bible speaks of 'giants' and describes them as 'sons of God', and these 'sons of God' breed with daughters of men and multiply (44-45).

While these things, the Lakota Circle, Mark Twain, Erich von Däniken and the Inuit folk tale, might seem to be unrelated they have something in common. They provide insight into how my work functions. You can think of it as purchasing a single box at the estate sale, each item in the box has something to say about the person telling the story. When I discovered the book on Inuit art, I was looking for a way to tell my own story with regards to my struggles with grief related to the suicide of my spouse. Early on in appropriating the image of



Figure 6, *Natural Selection*, postcard, 2011

the giant, I viewed the giant as my grief and myself as the diminutive person in the clutches of the giant. My first work with this image was a block cut postcard of the giant as an astronaut with a small child or baby in its clutches. This piece was titled *Natural Selection* (Fig. 6). As time went I came to see myself as The Astronaut and changed the title of this image from *Natural Selection* to *Evolution* (Fig. 7). In this piece I began to see the baby as relating to my memories. From this piece forward I began to build my vocabulary.

The ambiguity and mystery surrounding The Astronaut, with his veiled face and body, was something I felt important, as I saw my grief as undefined and ambiguous. In this ambiguity The Astronaut remains anonymous, much like the superheroes of television or



Figure 7, *Evolution II*, 2011

comic books. In his book, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud argues that the simplified features of cartoon characters are easier for readers to identify with than more representational drawings. McCloud states, “By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world

in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts” (41). Realistic drawings portray an objective view of reality, McCloud claims, that cartoons draw the viewer into the character’s subjective view. In my depiction of The Astronaut, his helmet hides his identity while his eyes remain visible and his expression is stoic. One of the characteristics of The Astronaut that I relate to is that he is mostly hidden inside his space suit; as I also view grief as a wound that is unseen. In transitioning from thinking of the the giant as my grief, I became drawn to the notion of The Astronaut as an explorer, a lone traveler. I also view him as having the characteristics of a modern-day cowboy or gunslinger, unafraid to take on the unknown, forging a new path where none can be seen. The space suit also bears reference to other suits worn by superheroes, which can be worn for protection or as a disguise.

My Astronaut wears an emblem of a lightning bolt (Fig. 8) on his chest like the characters in many super heroes such as Superman or The Fantastic Four. It is in this disguise that one can hide from the world showing only what you wish for others to see. McCloud also states, “This combination allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a stimulating world” (43). Another aspect of the comic that intrigues me is the ‘gutter,’ or the space between the frames. McCloud states that “Whatever the mysteries within the panel, it’s the power of closure between panels that I find the most interesting” (88). I played on this



Figure 8, Astronaut detail from EFAC Gallery Installation, 2013



Figure 9, Detail from the *Orange You Glad I Didn't Say Banana* Installation, 2014

notion in my *Orange You Glad I Didn't Say Banana* Installation, 2014, (Fig. 9). In this exhibition I took advantage of the of the windows to mimic the gutters of a comic book or graphic novel. The linework around the cut out characters becomes the gutter for the graphic image underneath. This is most evident in *The Bear and The Ice Cream Sundae*. However, in the characters that are simply identified by blocks of color, such as *The Astronaut* and *The Octopus*, the color functions as another kind of image (Fig. 10).



Figure 10, Detail from the *Orange You Glad I Didn't Say Banana* Installation, 2014

One can see a similar use of this

closure or 'gutter' most clearly in my pedestal pieces, where the images hang just above the pedestal highlighting the tension between the object and its condition (Fig. 11). This also differentiates my work from POP Art in the U.S. POP Art works are specifically interested in the image itself, my work is an examination of the space in which the image exists and how these images reflect and relate to each other. Another example of this can be seen in the way I create the edge of a form, specifically the space between



Figure 11, Detail from the Installation, 2013

the front and back of the image (Fig. 12). As I thought more about the process of healing, I began to think of healing as being about self-discovery. After the death of my spouse I was looking for ways to visualize myself as singular and not as a couple. To remember a time



Figure 12, Marathon Man displayed at Group Show entitled 54.5 Miles, 2014

when I was single was to travel back twenty-five years in my mind. In this context and with the transition of The Astronaut from an image of grief to grieving, I began to think of my images functioning similar to the Inuit rubbing or other pictographs that operate as a form of storytelling. In Egyptian Hieroglyphs' there are many images that when combined can communicate the same meaning, or when a line is added to an image the meaning can change completely. One of my goals has

become to develop a language of my own, through my work, to convey my experiences with grief that cannot be measured by words alone. It is also an exploration of a visual and textual



method of storytelling, challenging the traditional primarily textual and verbal storytelling techniques. In examining my personal experience with grief I have found memory to be intrinsically linked to how one handles and is affected by grief.



Figure 13, Detail from the *Orange You Glad I Didn't Say Banana* Installation, outside the gallery, 2014

Memory is the tool by which we gage past experiences to make present and future decisions in our lives. When a person dies, time stands still for that person. The rest of us move forward and change, but the deceased person



Figure 14, Detail from the Installation at the IUPUI Library, 2013

forever remains the same, a fixture and a memory. Memories become markers in time. The facets of memory and perception are intertwining. There are memories as I remember them, as someone else has perceived them and what documentation tells us about the event (Fig. 13). These concepts intrigue me

in telling a story of past and present

as they intermingle. In grappling with my memory and grief I began to become fixated on the quest to find comfort; I began to seek out tangible expressions of and places in which to take comfort. Comfort began to manifest itself in my work in a more literal way, initially showing up as comfort food such as The Grilled Cheese Sandwich (Fig. 14) or a Campfire (Fig.15). At the same time, emotions began to take on physical forms, such as The Bear and The



Figure 15, Aluminum Campfire, 2013

Baby (Fig. 16). As I searched my personal history for reference, I found myself drawn to

things in which I had taken comfort in as a child. For me these tended to be related to pop culture, animated cartoons, advertising, and comics.

I have become acutely aware of how the time I have spent traveling highways has influenced my life and my work. I've come to see the highways as ribbons of time and the billboards along the way as markers of moments along a path. I started using these billboards or billboard fragments, as backdrops or markers for moments in time upon which I could build my story as my work has progressed they have come to play a more integral part challenging the viewer to differentiate between. The billboards also layer images throughout my work that are familiar but fragmented, representing an image that originally had one reality but when seen as a fragment takes on a new reality. The familiar images of the billboards allow my work to interact with the viewer's perceptions and memories. I have come to see memory, moments and time to be tied together. Time is a measuring system; Daniel Tammet writes about measuring distance in time in his book *Thinking in Numbers: on Life, Love and the Meaning of Math* as follows:

Suddenly I could no longer depend on those eight seconds to deliver me to my destination. Worse, I could no longer be sure that they would let me move one inch. Those same interminable fractions of seconds that I had observed toward the end of my journey applied equally to the start. Say my opening step took one second; this second, of course, contained a halfway point. And before I could cross this half of a second, I would first have to traverse its own midway point (the initial quarter second), and so on. And yet, my legs disposed of all these fractions of seconds as they had always done. Adjusting the heavy schoolbag on my back, I walked the length between the lampposts and counted once again to eight. The word rang out defiantly into the cold crisp air. The silence that followed, however was short-lived. "What are you doing standing outside in the cold and the dark?" Shouted my father from the yellow oblong of the open front door. "Come inside now." I did not forget the infinity of fractions that lurked between the lampposts on my street. Day after day, I found myself involuntarily to a crawl as I passed them, afraid of perhaps falling between there whole seconds into the interspersed gaps. What a sight I must have made, inching warily forward tiny step by tiny step with my round woolly head and my lumpy bag upon my back (Tammet 17).

I began to think of the billboards along the highway in the same manner as Daniel Tammet described the lampposts. That through infinite division time stands still. I wondered when I could “come inside.” This accelerated division of space and time has been something I have been looking to create in the tension between objects when I install my work. It is also important to understand that I do not see the billboard fragments I use as recycled in the environmental sense. My interest in recycling images is because they are familiar, be it subconscious or conscious. I use these images to act as triggers for memories of the familiar. Building on the use of billboard imagery, I have started to include my own photographs in my vocabulary of imagery. This correlates well with the strong message typically being sent by the advertising associated with billboards. My images have always dealt with space in what I consider a “flat” way. In studying Japanese woodblock prints from the Edo & Meiji periods I discovered that this period is also what is considered to be the beginnings of Japanese Manga. There is a term known as “Superflat,” first coined by Takashi Murakami to talk about his own work and that of what is now considered Japanese POP Art. Before I share that description I’d like to talk a little bit about the origins of Japanese Pop Art and how I have come to be influenced by it. Japanese POP took its lead from American POP Art you might look at Andy Warhol’s “Oxidation” painting or Murakami’s 727 both paintings have an atmospheric quality to them Murakami’s work is based on a cosmetics company’s advertising, while Warhol’s is created from the oxidation of urine. Both pieces carry a similar atmospheric quality and are offered in contrast to commercialization. Another major difference between the two movements is that POP in the U.S. was born of victory; POP in Japan was born out of devastation. It is why I seem to align myself more closely with Japanese POP than with the U.S. Superflat. In a book related to the study of Manga titled *Emerging Worlds of Anime and*

*Manga*, there is a passage that describes how I view space in my own work:

In classic western perspective space, everything is unified and hierarchized by a single vanishing point; space itself is accordingly homogeneous, and everything finds its proper place within that space, including the spectator (drawn into the picture plane via the single vanishing point), in accordance with fixed mathematical laws of relation. This yields stable positions of near versus far, subject versus object, and supposedly, the position and identity of the viewing subject. Again, in a depth model, that now seems almost three-dimensional (but qualitatively homogeneous).

In the Superflat (or digital) world, though, precisely because identity is emergent and exists only at the surface, there is no single point of depth by which to locate a unitary subject. Superflat pictorial space instead allows for the layering of different surfaces, and each surface can be thought of as its own production of identity, with its own relation to an origin (in a way, each layer is an origin). There is no hierarchization of space or ©Murakami MCA LA 2007 fig. 10 privileged gaze of the eye that might create a stable unified subject position or create a singular depth (Looser 98).

Looser illustrates two points that interest me, the most important being the use of surface as

space. In using space without perspective I can

transpose emotional content for physical reali-

ty without concern as to where either exists in

a physical space (Fig. 16). Using this superflat

space allows the viewer to become immersed in

the space and the viewer is not allowed to locate

themselves in space. The viewer is allowed to travel at random from surface to surface unlike

if it had been rendered in one or two point perspective. To exaggerate this viewpoint I will

physically suspend an object above or in front of the surface or “environment” within which

these objects or characters are allowed to exist. I further enhance this through the use of flat

and glossy painted surfaces, as well as printed and photographed surfaces. This allows me

to create a more cohesive reality where emotional and physical spaces exist together. It also

allows for the emotion to become a physical reality. This can be seen in more traditional



Figure 16, *Pillow Talk* mobile, detail from installation at the Harrison Center for the Arts, 2014

painterly or print works that hang on the wall, but is also very visible in the freestanding work. This concept of surface is used in both printed media and animation, which also connects with the viewer and allows them to easily access my work. This way of working with surfaces also allows me to move freely among different formats and materials. I have created works that are books, sculptural, painted, cast, and printed, as well as projected images. This way of working also allows me to move easily from the intimate to the familiar, from personal space to a world-scape all with relative ease with in the same work. The definition of perception also highlights for me that there is a familiarity in this way of looking at space because it comes from a view derived from popular culture.

Following in the tradition of the commercially developed characters such as Rocky and Bullwinkle, Ren and Stimpy and Sponge Bob Squarepants, I have developed and continue to create characters that are inspired by the complex relationships developed in these serial stories. My work is meant to engage the viewer and to challenge their beliefs regarding the complexities of a memory. Is a memory similar to a copy as it is reproduced via a copy machine? Does it become a copy of a copy as we recall it or is it more



Figure 17, *Scott's Floor Covering*, 2013



Figure 18, *Campfire* detail from install at Harrison Center for the Arts, 2014

fluid and changing with current circumstances. This is something I explore in the multiplicity in my work. Examples of multiples in my work include works I have created in editions in book form (Fig. 17) or multiples such as the Campfires (Fig. 18) or in the box pieces I have created such as the edition of

four titled *Portable Campfire* (Fig. 19) or the larger single box titled *Buy a Box of Happiness* (Fig. 20) and in the repetition of a character in multiple pieces such as The Astronaut work



titled *Johnny Rydell* (Fig. 21). These works encompass the physicality of the emotional pain I have experienced, which is compounded by repetition and sometimes alleviated by the things in which I take comfort. The viewer is meant to identify and engage with my characters.

My hope is that the viewer will immerse themselves in

my work and discover its contemplative nature. It is also meant to be serial, something that



Figure 19, *Prtable Campfire*, 2013



Figure 20, *Buy a Box of Happiness*, 2013

leaves the viewer wanting more while somehow leaving them satisfied with what they have gotten. Returning back to the estate sale analogy, the viewer is the person taking home items, who has no association with the original owner and has their own interaction with the objects or experience with the pieces that they now possess.

The work I have created over the last two years has allowed me to more deeply explore my interest in memory, particularly as it relates to grief. Through the exploration of material, surface, line and the multiple, be it repetition of a character or more literally through the creation of repetitive images, I have been able to expand my language in the hopes of giving the viewer an experience. I hope that the viewer creates a new memory



Figure 21, *Johnny Rydells'*, 2013

that might affect a moment in the present or in the future.

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